

# Pakistan: man sentenced to death for blasphemy on Facebook

Monday 12 June 2017, by [ENGEL RASMUSSEN Sune](#), [GILLANI Waqar](#) (Date first published: 11 June 2017).

**Taimoor Raza was found guilty of insulting the prophet Mohammed during an argument on social media with a counter-terrorism official.**

An anti-terrorism court in Pakistan has sentenced a man to death for allegedly committing blasphemy on Facebook, the latest step in an intensified crackdown on dissent on social media.

A court in Bahawalpur handed out the verdict, the harshest yet for such a crime, after finding Taimoor Raza, 30, guilty of insulting the prophet Muhammad.

Raza was arrested last year after a debate about Islam on Facebook with a man who turned out to be a counter-terrorism agent. He was one among 15 people arrested by the counter-terrorism department last year, accused of blasphemy, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

The verdict is part of a wider crackdown on perceived dissent on social media in a country where unfounded allegations of blasphemy can lead to mob vigilante justice.

Raza's brother, Waseem Abbas, said the family was "poor but literate", and belonged to Pakistan's minority Shia Muslim community. "My brother indulged in a sectarian debate on Facebook with a person, who we later come to know, was a [counter-terrorism department] official with the name of Muhammad Usman," he said.

Raza's defence attorney said his client had been charged with two unrelated sections of the law to ensure the maximum penalty. "Initially, it was a case of insulting remarks on sectarian grounds and the offence was 298A, which punishes for derogatory remarks about other religious personalities for up to two years," said Fida Hussain Rana, the defence counsel. Raza was later charged under section 295C of the penal code, related to "derogatory acts against prophet Muhammad", Rana said.

Social media represents a new battleground for the Pakistani fight against blasphemy. Authorities have asked Twitter and Facebook to help identify users sharing blasphemous material, and have distributed text messages encouraging Pakistanis to report fellow citizens.

Human rights defenders have expressed concern that the country's blasphemy laws, and the authorities' zealous application of them, provide a tool for people to carry out personal vendettas, particularly because nobody is ever punished for making false accusations.

"The casual manner in which death sentences are handed in blasphemy cases coupled with the lack of orientation of Pakistani courts with technology makes this a very dangerous situation," said Saroop Ijaz, a lawyer with Human Rights Watch in Pakistan.

"Such sentences will embolden those who want to wrongly frame people," he said, noting with

concern that Saturday's sentence was handed down by an anti-terrorism court, not a regular court. "The confusion between national security and religion is very alarming," Ijaz said.

Aside from blasphemy, national security charges are also levelled against people who say their only offence is opposition to the government.

Recently, the Federal Investigation Agency detained dozens of social media users for posting "anti-military" content, including journalists and supporters of the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaaf (PTI) party, one of whom shared a satirical photo of prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

They were detained under the controversial Prevention of Electronic Crime Act, passed last year, which has been criticised for curbing human rights and giving overreaching powers to law enforcement agencies.

An FIA official told the *Guardian* that his agency had orders from the interior ministry to interrogate, and seize laptops and phones, without warrant. "We are authorised to detain anyone, just on suspicion," the agent said.

Quratulain Zaman, human rights defender with Bytes for All Pakistan [1], said the harassment of social media users was unprecedented, and a sign of social media's growing ability to shape public opinion, including against the military.

While Raza is the first person sentenced to death for blasphemy on social media, several others are on death row for alleged blasphemy in public. Among them is Asia Bibi, a Christian woman convicted in 2010 after a row with two Muslim women in a village in Punjab. With a long-awaited final appeal adjourned, Bibi is still in solitary confinement [2].

In Pakistan, blasphemy is so contentious that the mere mention of unfounded allegations can ignite mass uproar. In April, a mob at a north-western university took 23-year-old Mashal Khan from his dormitory and lynched him, angered by accusations that Khan had offended Islam.

Last week, a joint investigation concluded the baseless allegations had been a conspiracy by some students and university staff.

In another incident, in May, a 10-year-old boy was killed when a mob tried to storm a police station in Balochistan in anger at a man held on blasphemy charges.

Four people were sentenced to death for blasphemy last year, according to the HRC.

In a 2016 report (pdf) by the commission, Justice Ibadur Rehman Lodhi rejected most blasphemy allegations. "A majority of blasphemy cases were based on false accusations, stemming from property disputes or other personal or family vendettas rather than genuine instances of blasphemy," he said.

**Sune Engel Rasmussen** in Kabul and **Waqar Gillani** in Islamabad

*Additional reporting by Kiyya Baloch.*

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**P.S.**

\* The Guardian. Sunday 11 June 2017 11.22 BST First published on Sunday 11 June 2017 02.31 BST: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/11/pakistan-man-sentenced-to-death-for-blasphemy-on-facebook>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://content.bytesforall.pk>

[2] ESSF (article 41277), [Final appeal: Asia Bibi blasphemy appeal adjourned in Pakistan as judge pulls out](#).